United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service

# Florida's Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program State Plan

## 1. State Objectives

Florida is widely recognized as one of North America's most important reservoirs of biological diversity. Millsap et al. (1990) reported that 668 terrestrial and freshwater vertebrate taxa occur regularly in Florida. This list includes 75 mammals, 283 birds (excluding some migratory species), 127 reptiles, 57 amphibians, and 125 fishes. About 115 (17%) of these are not found elsewhere in the United States (Muller et al. 1989). Florida also contains approximately 3,500 species of vascular plants, of which about 8% are endemic (Ward 1979, Muller et al. 1989). The total number of invertebrates species inhabiting Florida is not known, but at least 410 invertebrates are thought to be endemic (Muller et al. 1989). The existence of so many endemic species in Florida confers upon us a weighty responsibility: our conservation and management activities are of global importance in efforts to conserve the diversity of life on earth.

Florida represents a transitional area between the tropical West Indies and temperate North America, and the state contains fauna and floral elements of both. Although fourth in the nation in human population, Florida still has many large forested tracts that support several wide-ranging vertebrates. The only population of panthers remaining in the eastern US is restricted to remote areas of southwest Florida. Black bears have been eliminated from much of the former range of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and other southeastern states, but sizable populations are found in several areas of Florida. The state has the largest remaining population of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. A large percentage of the neotropical migrant birds in the eastern US are dependent on habitats used as staging stops immediately before or after crossing the Gulf of Mexico.

Florida is also biologically diverse in terms of the number of recognized plant communities. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory (1990) describes 81 natural communities that occur in Florida, 13 of which are endemic.

A report was prepared by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (Commission) entitled "Closing the Gaps In Florida's Wildlife Habitat Conservation System (Gap Report). The report describes habitat areas in Florida that should be conserved if key components of the state's biological diversity are to be maintained. The project employed a computerized Geographic Information System (GIS) to manipulate geographic data sets and create distribution maps for selected species of wildlife, threatened species of plants and rare plant communities. The geographic data sets used in the project included a statewide land-cover map derived from Landsat satellite imagery, over 25,000 geographically referenced points, documentation of known occurrence of rare animals, plants and communities, digitized maps of public and private lands devoted to some extent to conservation, a digitized general soils map, a digitized map of the statewide road network, a digitized map of selected private lands and a digitized map of county boundaries.

Drawing from techniques recently developed in the fields of wildlife management and conservation biology, the GIS was used to assess the degree of security provided to rare species by the current system of conservation lands and to identify important habitat areas not currently protected. The lands recommended in the report for additional protection are referred to as Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas (SHCAs). SHCAs depict lands needed to meet minimum conservation goals for the following:

- 30 species of wildlife inadequately protected by current system of conservation lands,
- high quality sandhill sites,
- high quality scrub sites,
- high quality pine rocklands sites;
- high quality examples of tropical hardwood hammocks,
- bat maternity caves and winter roost caves,
- wetlands important to the breeding success of eight species of wading birds and
- ands important to the long-term survival of 105 globally rare species of plants

Conservation management of SHCAs will ensure that a wide range of species in addition to those above will share in the benefits.

The SHCAs encompass 4.82 million acres, or approximately 13% of the land area of Florida. The existing system of conservation lands in Florida covers 6.95 million acres or 20% of the land area of the state. Thus if all of the SHCAs were protected, approximately 11.7 million acres, or about 33% of the land area of Florida, would fall into some type of conservation land use.

Since 1974, the State has spent an average of $1,182 per acre to purchase land for recreation, conservation and historical preservation. At this rate, $5.7 billion would be needed to purchase all 4.82 million acres within the SHCAs, which is much more than the $3.2 billion authorized under Preservation 2000 (a Florida land acquisition program). Fortunately many of the lands within the SHCAs are in low intensity land uses, such as silviculture and rangeland, that are compatible with the habitat conservation needs of many species. In fact, the management of wildlife habitat on many private lands has been excellent. Conservation measures should focus on maintaining existing land uses on private lands through positive incentives such as tax breaks, conservation easements, and cooperative agreements with landowners including enrollment of lands in the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). This would have the potential to provide adequate protection without the need for fee-simple acquisition by the State. WHIP could be important in developing management strategies and encouraging practices that could improve or maintain wildlife habitat values on private lands within the SHCAs.

Another priority for Florida's WHIP plan would be to join efforts with the surrounding states (Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi) to improve early successional and grassland habitats and enhance habitats used by neotropical migrant birds. These efforts are needed to halt population declines in wildlife species dependent on these important habitats. Addressing this priority under WHIP will benefit a broad spectrum of important wildlife species including bobwhite quail, grasshopper sparrows, loggerhead shrikes, eastern kingbirds, eastern meadowlarks, and the numerous neotropical migrant bird species that pass through Florida each spring and fall.

Loss of early successional and grassland habitats is a regional problem that is particularly serious in Florida. Rapid human population growth and associated development has accelerated habitat loss and degradation to an alarming rate. Implementation of specific wildlife habitat improvements and management practices on private lands will have direct, positive impacts on declining wildlife species. The technical assistance and other incentives authorized under WHIP can ensure important wildlife habitat is sustained in Florida.

In addition to providing technical assistance and cost-shares for habitat enhancement, interaction with program participants will help to educate landowners regarding wildlife habitat. Considering Florida's accelerated growth and changing land patterns, this interaction should foster a change in public attitudes towards wildlife, wildlife habitat and ultimately land stewardship.

**2. State Wildlife Priorities**

The primary goal of Florida's WHIP plan is to enhance or restore native habitat and to emphasize conservation efforts that benefit rare, threatened or endangered species or ecological communities. As the Gap report and designated SHCAs already address many of these areas of concern, special consideration will be given to lands within or proximal to SHCAs. Regional objectives to improve native habitat used by declining wildlife such as bobwhite quail and neotropical migrant birds are also targeted.

SHCAs also have been used by various state land acquisition programs such as Preservation 2000, the Conservation and Recreational Lands program and Save Our Rivers program to establish funding priorities. Additionally, other entities including the state's five water management districts have focused land acquisition funds on the these SHCAs. Acquisition programs do not provide incentives for wildlife habitat improvement on lands acquired. Therefore, Florida's WHIP plan will focus conservation efforts toward tracts proximal to existing conservation land to enhance conservation efforts.

The efforts of the WHIP program will not fully meet the needs of the Gap report, however, this program will allow practices to be implemented on private lands, possibly forgoing the need for acquisition. The combination of acquisition and conservation programs, including the WHIP program, will help make a significant contribution towards conservation of identified wildlife priorities. The concept of an incentives program for wildlife on privately owned lands is consistent with the Gap Report.

**3. Partnership Involvement**

To successfully implement the WHIP in Florida, a partnership will be formed with the Commission. In addition, some private non-governmental organizations (NGOs) support WHIP priorities in Florida and have agreed to cooperate. Letters of support (attached) have been received from Quail Unlimited and Tall Timbers Research, Inc. These NGOs offer expertise and valuable resources to assist with effective implementation of WHIP priorities. Their support will be

important in training county level NRCS staff, promoting programs and practices, and monitoring program success.

**4. State Ranking Criteria**

Attached is a copy of the Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Assessment (WHEA) ranking criteria that will be used to determine which participant applications will be funded under WHIP. The ranking criteria and wildlife habitat needs were developed in coordination with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the State Technical Committee.

In order to be considered for WHIP funds, the applicant's:

- objectives must meet or exceed the national quality criteria in order to meet RMS requirements; this criteria is .3 of potential for wildlife habitat. Quality criteria must show an *increase* due to implementation of WHIP conservation practices.
- objectives must be for enhancement or restoration of wildlife land and consideration given to conservation measures that directly benefit state and federally listed species, neotropical or other migrant birds, rare or declining habitat and tracts strategically located within or near a Strategic Habitat Conservation Area or near other conservation areas as outlined on the WHEA form (i.e., FL-CPA-33L)

**5. Measuring Program Success**

Attached is a copy of the Wildlife Habitat Evaluation for Resource Management System (WHEP) that will be used to establish baseline conditions, project conditions under planned alternatives, and to monitor progress. Quality assurance reviews will be periodically conducted at both the area and state office levels.